

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Remembering the Forgotten Gandhi



SHASHI THAROOR

MARCH 12 marked the 90th anniversary of one of the most momentous events in India's nationalist struggle: the start of the Dandi March, which inaugurated Mahatma Gandhi's most successful attempt at civil disobedience against the British Raj. With India's pluralism and democracy under greater threat today than at any time since independence, the lessons of the march have never been more relevant.

The Dandi March was rooted in a longstanding grievance. The British had turned salt production and distribution into a lucrative monopoly. Indians were prohibited from producing or selling salt independently, and were required to buy expensive, heavily taxed, and often imported salt. Indian protests against the salt tax had begun in the nineteenth century, but Gandhi's decision in 1930 to demonstrate against it was a breakthrough moment.

Gandhi started marching from his ashram near Ahmedabad to the town of Dandi on the Arabian Sea, some 385 kilometres (239 miles) away. Along the way, his group stopped in villages, wherever larger crowds gathered to hear the Mahatma denounce the tax. Hundreds joined as the marchers made their way to the coast.

On April 5, they reached Dandi. The next morning, Gandhi and his followers picked up handfuls of salt along the shore, thus technically "producing" salt and breaking the law—a visually compelling and profoundly effective act of civil disobedience.

This dramatic event seized the imagination of India and the world. Gandhi continued his protest against the salt tax for the next two months, exhorting other Indians to break the salt laws. Thousands were arrested and

imprisoned; the Mahatma was imprisoned in early May, after he informed Viceroy Lord Irwin of his intention to lead a march on the Dharasana saltworks.

News of Gandhi's detention spurred tens of thousands more to join the march, which went ahead on May 21. Some 2,500 peaceful marchers were attacked and beaten by police. By the end of 1930, roughly 60,000 people had been jailed.

The Raj had seen nothing like it, and the imperial authorities realised that continued repression and detention were unsustainable. Gandhi was released from custody in January 1931 and began negotiations with Irwin. A truce was formalised in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, signed on March 5, 1931. The calming of tensions paved the way for Gandhi, representing the Indian National Congress, to attend the second session of the Round Table Conference in London. His civil disobedience campaign had succeeded; moral victory was his.

The Indian National Congress, now in opposition, is recalling this moment by partly re-enacting the Dandi March. In doing so, the party is echoing Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, who, at the moment of independence, spoke of the Mahatma as "embodying the old spirit of India" whose message would be remembered by "succeeding generations."

What was that message? The Mahatma led the world's first successful nonviolent movement for independence from colonial rule. At the same time, he was a philosopher who constantly sought to live out his ideas, whether they applied to individual self-improvement or social change: revealingly, his autobiography was titled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

No dictionary imbues "truth" with the depth of meaning Gandhi gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate, but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by "untruthful" or unjust means, which included inflicting violence upon

one's opponent.

To describe his method, Gandhi coined the expression satyagraha—literally, "holding on to truth," or, as he variously described it, truth force, love force, or soul force. He disliked the English term "passive resistance," because satyagraha required activism, not passivity. If you believed in truth and cared enough to

truth by inflicting suffering on one's self rather than on one's opponent. Accepting punishment was essential to demonstrate the strength of one's convictions.

This was the approach Gandhi brought to India's independence movement—and, unlike sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism, it worked. Gandhi took



A schoolgirl poses for a picture next to a statue of Mahatma Gandhi at Ahmedabad in Gujarat, on October 2, 2013.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AMIT DAVE

obtain it, Gandhi felt, you could not afford to be passive: you had to be prepared to suffer for truth.

So, nonviolence, like non-cooperation and non-alignment, meant much more than the denial of an opposite. It did not merely imply the absence of violence. One vindicated the

the issue of freedom to the masses as one of simple right and wrong and gave them a technique to which the British had no response.

By renouncing violence, Gandhi wrested the moral advantage. By breaking the law nonviolently, he highlighted the injustice

of the law. By accepting the punishments imposed on him, he forced his captors to confront their own brutal behaviour. By voluntarily subjecting himself to hunger strikes, he demonstrated the lengths to which he was prepared to go in defence of what he considered to be right. In the end, he made the perpetuation of British rule impossible.

Dandi and Gandhi offer today's India more than historical resonance. But one fact must be acknowledged: Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience works only against opponents vulnerable to a loss of moral authority—a government responsive to domestic and international public opinion and capable of being shamed into conceding defeat. It has little effect on those who are not interested in whether they are wrong. For them, your willingness to undergo punishment to prove them wrong is the most convenient means of victory. Gandhism without moral authority is like Marxism without a proletariat.

Yet few who have tried his methods have had his personal integrity or moral stature. While the world was spiralling into fascism, violence, and war, the Mahatma taught the virtues of truth, nonviolence, and peace. He destroyed colonialism's credibility by opposing principle to force. And he set and attained personal standards of conviction and courage that few will ever match. He was that rare leader who was not limited by the inadequacies of his followers.

The originality of Gandhi's thought and the example of his life still inspire people around the world. Unfortunately, it is a world in which one must wonder if we really have learned what he meant by truth—and how to identify and defend it.

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## RIGHT TO INFORMATION

# Learning from the UK's experience

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

OUR last column was focused on the multifarious use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the United States. Following that exercise and some positive feedback from readers, we focus today on the use of FOIA in the United Kingdom. We hope that the vast range of use of the law in different countries would help our citizens to explore newer and more effective ways of putting it to use.

To get a flavour of the public perspective about the law in the UK, let us recall the famous lament of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, during whose term of office the FOI Act of the UK was adopted in 2004, but who was soon disenchanted about it. The law was so frequently invoked by journalists to unearth unpleasant facts about his administration that in his memoirs he castigated himself as a "naïve, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop" for having agreed to its enactment.

Over the last 15 years, FOIA has been widely used by journalists and the British people generally to obtain information which would have otherwise remained unknown to them. They led to disclosure of facts that caused much embarrassment and loss of face for British politicians. The most important of them was the scandal over expenses that erupted in 2009 leading to prison terms for five Labour MPs and two Conservative peers, numerous resignations and retirements, as well as repayment of significant sums of money. The most scandalous of the claims was one which revealed that one MP had tried to claim 1,645 pounds for a floating duck house in the garden-pond at his constituency home. Since then, there has been a tug of war between government ministers and civil society activists on whether the law should be emasculated or strengthened.

A most transformative feature of the sensational disclosures on the MPs, which were accompanied by a lengthy legal battle, was that the House of Commons authorities were forced to collate millions of invoices, receipts, letters and other documents

relating to the MPs' expense claims going back over several years and to create a new parliamentary pay and expenses system. Observers have called it "a reputational disaster for Parliament and the political class generally." *The Daily Telegraph* ran stories on what they called "highly embarrassing, greedy, unjustifiable and sometimes criminal behaviour by politicians."

It should be underlined, however, that RTI/FOI stories need not always be of a sensational nature. A survey of FOIA stories from the UK indicated use of the

Here are a few examples:

### Ambulance delays

A survey of FOIA disclosures in 2013 revealed that some patients taken by ambulance to accident and emergency departments were kept waiting in the vehicle for much longer than the recommended 15 minutes, several hours in some cases.

### Unanswered 101 calls

Hundreds of thousands of phone calls to the 101 non-emergency police number have gone unanswered annually. The data for a nine-

established a precedent for such reports to be made proactively available in the public domain. Now food hygiene ratings for hundreds of thousands of restaurants, cafes and shops are routinely made public.

### Metropolitan Police defaulting on non-serious crimes

A FOIA response revealed that the UK's biggest police force had a tendency to stop responding to some less serious crimes. Offences such as vandalism, vehicle crime and fuel theft will not be pursued if the cost of the damage or amount taken is less than 50 pounds.

### Some other disclosures

Around 49,000 people demanded compensation for damage caused to their vehicles by worn-out roads. Some Tory MPs took millions of pounds in housing benefits. More than 3,000 police officers were investigated for alleged brutality and most remained on the beat. Prime Minister Gordon Brown claimed 732-pound pen cartridges on expenses. Over 8,200 racism allegations were made against 8,000 Metropolitan Police officers since 2000. Reported child sexual abuse had risen 60 percent in four years. Security guards were used to restrain dementia patients in hospitals. A third of all burglaries in England and Wales were committed by children. More than 500,000 home care visits lasted less than five minutes. Rising numbers of hospital patients were so fed up that they discharged themselves. Hospitals were forced to call in rat catchers every week after Prime Minister David Cameron axed 2,000 cleaners.

The examples will hopefully help the readers to appreciate the large scope of FOI/RTI use. Over the last 10 years in Bangladesh, the RTI Act 2009 has been utilised by our citizens, albeit very scarcely, mainly for personal-level use and to some extent for neighbourhood or group benefits. That the law is actually meant to keep the government offices dealing with matters of larger public interests under watch is largely lost on our citizens.

We have seen successful use of the law to ensure that government services, like safety-

net programmes for the indigent, scholarship beneficiaries and not siphoned off by corrupt officials. The law has also been used to check if local bridges and culverts were properly built and contractors chosen through proper tendering, and if unfair means or favour was used in assessing answer papers of public service examinees. However, there is a clear dearth of attention to matters affecting the entire nation.

The picture in neighbouring India is much different, however. There, the RTI Act has recently been used to unearth sensitive information about the government's controversial demonetisation decision, to ask for information relating to the government's decision on the Citizenship Amendment Act or abrogation of Section 370 of the Indian Constitution affecting the special status of Jammu and Kashmir or curbing the internet transmission in the state. We need to ponder why such examples are lacking in Bangladesh.

It is indeed legitimate for citizens to cry foul against government action or inaction, but how about our own failure to use the law to seek government accountability? The law makes citizens responsible to dig deeper into the allegations they have against government offices by seeking relevant information on them. If the response to their RTI requests is unsatisfactory, they can at least seek recourse under the law. This may not lead to solve many problems but solving even a few, as we have witnessed on a few occasions, may pave the way for the future. The demolition order of the BGMEA building is a good example to prove the efficacy of the RTI Act.

More importantly perhaps, a greater use of the law by citizens is likely to develop an interaction between them and public officials, which is largely absent now. If it happens in a bigger way, it will be a big boost for democracy. Promotion of responsible and accountable governance requires alert and responsible citizens.

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## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



(MARCH 15, 44 BC)  
**Julius Caesar assassinated on the Ides of March**

Roman dictator Julius Caesar was launching a series of political and social reforms when he was assassinated this day, the Ides of March, by a group of nobles, among whom were Cassius and Brutus.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

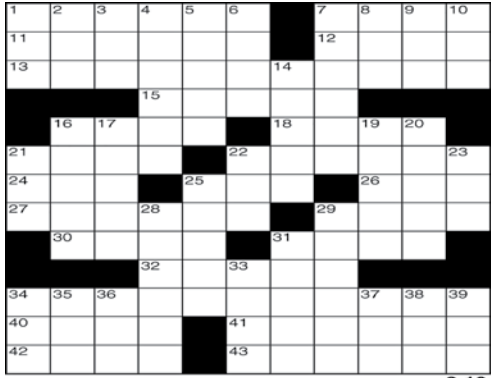
- Middle East language
- Hoe target
- TV's Ray
- Friend
- Drink garnish
- Not flimsy
- Hearty dish
- Blue hue
- Sullen look
- Victor
- "— Town"
- Dapper fellow
- Maiden name label
- Grade school book
- Bully's target
- Snooty fellow
- Shrewd

### DOWN

- Gallery fill
- Squabble
- Bordeaux buddy
- Long-eared hound
- As a follower
- Refrigerate
- Thoreau work
- Quarterback Manning
- Shade tree
- Fabric color
- Conform

- Whiskey drinks
- 2006 Olympics site
- Building wing
- Suspicious
- Cork sound
- Simple card game
- Spectrum end
- First performance
- Tasty bit
- Milk choice
- Flutes' cousins
- Jot down
- Belonging to thee
- Misery
- Under the weather
- Tough wood
- Golf prop
- Blunder

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## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



## BEEBLE BAILEY



## BABY BLUES

